



Children and Family Services
Training Center
Department of Social Work
University of North Dakota



Fostering Communications

Summer 2008

Building a Network of People in the Foster Care System

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More than “Just the Caregiver”

By Tina Vercelli

The elevator door opened and in front of me was an all too familiar scene. It was Wednesday, the designated weekday for all foster care cases to be heard by our county’s family court judge. The crowded hallway was filled to the brim with children crying, caseworkers flittering from group to group, making last minute contact with their clients, lawyers going in and out of the judges office, vying for position on the day’s docket. All while the court clerk was making her way through the crowd, directing people on the small claims docket to their designated courtroom.

As I assessed my surroundings, the caseworker assigned to my foster children’s case approached me. We exchanged the usual pleasantries, then almost as quickly as she appeared, she was off again to deal with one of her many cases.

So once again, the children and I were alone in a crowd of people, waiting for our turn in the courtroom. I busied myself with the children, handing them toys, and making sure they had their juice and snacks. Doing my best to keep them and myself occupied.

Suddenly, I was approached by a older man in a gray suit. He looked at me, then the children, then in a gruff voice asked, “Are these the Franklin* children?” I hesitantly replied, “Yes.” not knowing who was asking the question. Before I could ask this stranger just who he was and just why he wanted to know, he quickly said, “And you are the CAREGIVER?” The feeling of contempt stuck to the words as they hung in the air, as if it pained him to even ask the question. It was obvious that he saw me as nothing more than an employee, paid to care for other people’s children. As I was replying that I was the foster parent, he swiftly turned away, moving on to yet another group of people. It wasn’t until it was our turn to enter the courtroom that I discovered that this man, who

never even bothered to introduce himself, was the attorney assigned to represent my foster children.

After the hearing, I approached the attorney. I introduced myself to him, and asked if we could set up a meeting so he could meet the children and discuss the case. In the same curt, gruff voice I had experienced before, he looked at me and said, “I don’t need to talk to you, you are JUST THE CAREGIVER.”

So many times, we as foster parents are left out of the loop. We all learned in our initial training that foster parents are to be treated as important members of the team. But what do you do when other members of the team don’t want you on the field?

Some team members seem to think they know more. Attorneys know more. Caseworkers know more. Counselors know more. In some cases, the foster parents are thought to know less than all of the “professionals” involved in the case. Foster parents are then left to wonder about their part in the team. When the concerns and questions of a foster parent are dismissed by other members of the team, it can be frustrating as well as detrimental to the foster child.

Good foster parents make a point to become knowledgeable about the issues that their foster children face. So many times, foster children have a multitude of issues such as ADHD, attachment disorders, psychological problems, or developmental issues. The longer that a child is with us, the more educated we should become about their issues. Many times, it is the foster parent that has the most complete knowledge of the child’s needs. But because these children come into care with so many issues, it sometimes becomes painfully obvious that there is usually no clear-cut plan to help our foster children. Also, each professional specializes in only one, or maybe two issues. A teacher would pick up on

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From the State Office

By Don Snyder, Administrator,
Foster Care Program



Dear Foster Parents:

Each May during Foster Care Month, we salute the compassionate people who make a difference in the lives of North Dakota's children and families throughout the year.

As you know, young people in foster care especially need nurturing adults on their side because their own families are in crisis and unable to care for them. Thanks to the kindness and dedication of people like you, many of these formerly abused or neglected children and teens will either safely reunite with their parents, be cared for by relatives, or be adopted by loving families.

We applaud your caring commitment and continuing support. Without the ongoing efforts of foster parents, relative caregivers, mentors, advocates, social workers, and volunteers, too many children will end up facing life's challenges all alone.

Together, we can offer young people in foster care the guidance, stability and love that are so essential for becoming successful adults. We greatly appreciate and recognize all that you do to help Change a Lifetime for a child in need.

More Than "Just A Caregiver"

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educational or developmental issues way before an attorney would. The attorney, however, would know much more about the child's legal issues than a pediatrician. Because of this, it becomes even more important that the foster parent act as the connecting block between all members of the team who are looking after the needs of the child.

But how do you deal with team members that don't see you as knowledgeable about your foster child's needs. What about the attorney that refuses to speak with you, or the school administrator that will not allow you input into your child's individual education plan? How do you handle a professional that believes they know more than you do about the child?

It's difficult to alter another person's belief from thinking you are just a caregiver to understanding that you are an important, knowledgeable, and vital part of the professional team. What we can do as foster parents is control how we present ourselves to the other members of the team. The following is a list of suggestions that all foster parents should remember when dealing with other members of the professional team:

1. Keep detailed documentation of the foster child's

behaviors, eating patterns, and the child's likes and dislikes. Also, record all doctor appointments, dental visits, educational milestones and difficulties, contact with child welfare personnel, and visits with biological family. Be assured that the other members of the team are keeping records, so it only makes sense that you should too.

2. Research the issues that your foster child has and become as knowledgeable as you can about them. The internet can be a valuable tool to use to research things. Read books that deal with the special issues foster children face. Knowledge is power! If you think the information you find can help your foster child with a particular issue, pass that information along to the other members of the team.
3. Join your local and state foster parent associations and be active in them. You can gain a wealth of knowledge about the foster care system by talking with other foster parents. The support from others who are in the trenches with you can be invaluable.
4. Find out what your rights are as a foster parent. Get to know what information in the case file you are privy to. Know in many cases, foster parents are allowed to make input into educational plans, case plans, review hearings and court reports. Find out what you are allowed to do and how to exercise your rights. Attend every meeting you are allowed to participate in and don't be afraid to ask questions about things you don't understand.
5. When having to deal with more narrow-minded member of the team, be calm, but persistent. Don't be afraid to step up the chain of command in order to get the services and attention that the child needs. Everyone has a boss! Attorneys have to abide by a code of ethics outlined by their state bar association. They also have to ultimately answer to the presiding judge on the case. Doctor's have a code of ethics that they have to follow as well. Don't be afraid to seek out a second opinion, if you don't like how the child's needs are being met.
6. If, during a meeting or hearing, you get rattled or off-track, don't be afraid to excuse yourself to regroup. Always maintain a proper level of professionalism in your speech and demeanor.

Above all, don't be afraid to stand up for the rights of your foster child. Be tough, be tenacious, be diligent in your quest. You have a vital role in the professional team. Stand firm with the knowledge and understanding that you are important in the life of that child. Show the other members of the team that you are more than "JUST A CAREGIVER".

(Reprinted with permission of the author and Foster Care & Adoptive Community at <http://www.fosterparents.com> and www.fosterparents.com. Tina Vercelli is a former foster parent for Oklahoma DHS and has adopted five of their former foster children.)

FOSTER CARE FOCUS

Change A Lifetime

♥ *Share Your Heart*

- ♥ Help a foster care program in your state. Your contribution to these agencies will mean brighter and safer tomorrows for children and youth in your state and across America.
- ♥ Mentor a young person. Research shows that children and youth with mentors earn higher grades and improve their relationships with friends and families.
- ♥ Learn more about how policy, legislative and budget priorities affect children and youth in foster care.
- ♥ Donate goods such as suitcases, books, games, computers, sports equipment, musical instruments, clothing, and school supplies to young people in foster care.
- ♥ Send care packages to foster care alumni attending college.
- ♥ Help young people in foster care organize a youth leadership or support group.
- ♥ Become a virtual mentor for a young person in college. Expand the circle of support for a youth in foster care as an email/online pen pal.

🏠 *Open Your Home*

- 🏠 Become a foster or adoptive parent. Caring families are especially needed for older youth, siblings, and children with special needs.
- 🏠 Open your business “home” to help find families for youth in foster care. Find out how your organization can encourage people in your community (and your own employees) to get involved.
- 🏠 Find out about affordable housing options for young people making the transition from foster care.
- 🏠 Learn more about becoming a licensed respite care provider as a way of providing support to foster parents in your neighborhood.
- 🏠 Youth in foster care are more likely to require developmental and mental health services than many other children. If you are a Mental Health Professional, open your practice to at-risk children and learn more about how to respond to their mental health needs.

Governor John Hoeven signs the Proclamation designating May, 2008, as Children’s Foster Care Month throughout the state and he encouraged all North Dakotans to recognize and honor foster families for their many contributions to the well-being of our children. (l to r: Rita Weitz, Regional Foster Care Supervisor, West Central HSC; Ken Gerhardt, Director, Morton County Social Services; Governor Hoeven; Paul Ronningen, Director, Children & Family Services Division, NDDHS; and, Carol Mielke, Foster Parent.)

✳ *Offer Your Help*

- ✳ Wear a Blue Ribbon during May in support of National Foster Care Month. Attend a local ribbon-tying ceremony to advocate on behalf of the children in foster care in your state.
- ✳ Become a Court Appointed Special Advocate. CASA volunteers are trained citizens appointed by judges to represent the best interests of abused and neglected children.
- ✳ Learn how to help a youth in foster care explore career options, acquire new job skills, find employment or a resumé-building internship.
- ✳ Make a financial contribution to support the personal enrichment or education of a youth in foster care.
- ✳ Dedicate yourself to a career that helps families by becoming a professional social worker.
- ✳ Make presentations to your faith-based congregation, civic group, school PTA, and other neighborhood association. Encourage your community to come together to find families and resources that help young people in foster care thrive.
- ✳ Help young people in foster care (and their caregivers) improve their financial literacy and gain practical money management skills.
- ✳ Recognize/honor a foster parent in your community. Write a letter to the editor of your local newspaper in praise of someone making a difference in the life of a child in foster care.
- ✳ Learn the facts about foster care and gain a better understanding of the needs of those touched by this issue.



North Dakota Independent Living Program

By Dawnita Nilles, Region IV ILP Coordinator

Flexible Funding

A key part of the concept of the IL program was to make it flexible enough to really allow for assisting youth. Therefore, each Region is given a sum of money, referred to as Flexible Funding, to help youth reach their goal of independence. Our budgets, like everyone's, are limited; but we do have more flexibility in what we can assist with than other agencies have, which is a huge benefit to the youth. First we, of course, seek out funding from other sources but if it's not available we try to help out. However, it is important for everyone to realize that we are not just a funding source. We are here to assist youth who are actively participating in the IL program and taking steps to bring them closer to independence.

It is easier to give examples of items we can fund because each situation is so unique. It is also important to realize that any funding given is completely dependent on the individual situation and the amount of funds available. However, in general, if a youth gets a job at a restaurant that requires they wear something specific (such as the black pants required at Taco Bell or scrubs required for a CNA) we could purchase them. Or maybe an appropriate shirt and pants for an interview. We may purchase a bus pass to allow the youth to get back and forth to work, until they get their first paycheck and can purchase their own. If an already aged out youth is planning to complete their GED we could purchase a study guide.

When a youth moves into their first apartment we can help them by purchasing some "start up" items, such as cleaning supplies, towels, dishes and other kitchen items, etc.

We will also purchase incentives to encourage a youth to complete a particular learning experience (i.e. a gift card for completing a learning experience about how to balance a check book).

A last component with the Flexible Funding is Room and Board. We are able to assist with a portion of a youth's deposit on an apartment or utilities. Sometimes we are also able to assist with first months rent.

Whenever, an IL Coordinator is looking at a request for

the Flexible Funding we look at other resources that may be accessed (to help our funding go as far as possible) and we ask the question "Does the purchase of this good or service assist the youth in reaching their goal of independence?" That is our primary goal and we strive to assist them in any way we possibly can.

Scholarship

The North Dakota Foster & Adopt Parent Association awards scholarship money to youth in care who have a desire to further their education beyond high school. In 1984, the NDFPA announced the formation of a scholarship committee that led to the development of a scholarship trust fund the following year. The NDFAPA Scholarship is in the amount of \$600. In 1988, the Ruth Meiers Children's Memorial Scholarship was established in honor of the former State Representative and first female Lieutenant Governor of North Dakota. This is a \$500 annual award. Membership dues, memorials, contributions and donations from individuals and businesses help to fund the annual scholarships. It should be noted that all types of educational opportunities including university, college, junior college, technical or trade school and the like, will be considered.

The Dr. Bernard Brommel Scholarship for Foster Youth is awarded to a currently enrolled University of North Dakota student who is a former foster youth, preferably with PATH. Children and Family Services Training Center shall be responsible for selecting a student to be the recipient of this scholarship each year. Contact Pete Tunseth, Director, CFSTC, 701-777-3442.

Former residents of any facility operated by Home on the Range are eligible for a scholarship through the Fraternal Order of Eagles Memorial Foundation. Application must be made before reaching the age of 25 years. Contact HOTR, Sentinel Butte, ND, 701-872-3745.

Applications should be submitted by around the first of July for NDFAPA scholarships because the decisions on the award winners must be completed before the annual conference in October. Applications should be requested from Colette Sorenson, 1535 46th St. W, Williston, ND 58801. ph 701-572-5320.

127,000 foster children still waiting to be adopted

In May, approximately 4,245 foster children across the nation will be adopted. Unfortunately, 127,000 remain in the system, still waiting to be adopted into safe, permanent families. The popular, bipartisan Adoption Incentives Act is up for reauthorization in 2008. Created by the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 (PL 105-89), the program was designed to promote and increase the number of adoptions from foster care when reunification is not possible by rewarding states that increased adoptions each year. Prior to the program, there were 31,000 adoptions from foster care in 1997. Most recent numbers showed 51,000 adoptions from foster care in 2006, though that number has leveled in recent years. The current award mechanism has limited the number of states eligible to claim the bonuses in recent years, with only 18 states receiving \$7 million in incentives in 2006. Approximately \$36 million of authorized funds were not awarded in 2006. The program is set to expire September 30, 2008. (From Kids Are Waiting, a project of the PEW Charitable Trusts)

Awards

The Foster & Adopt Parent Association has the unique pleasure of presenting awards for the Foster and/or Adopt Parent(s), Social Worker and Agency of the Year. Each and every one of you deserve recognition and are to be commended for your effort to serve children and families in the state of North Dakota. It is always difficult to select the most outstanding person(s) or agencies when there are so many who deserve these awards. However, please take the time to nominate those who go "above and beyond" the realm of their duties. The Awards form featured here is to be used as a template of information required when nominating a person or agency for the NDFAPA awards. The Awards Committee will review all applications and select the respective winners who will then be named at the annual conference.

North Dakota

Foster & Adopt Parent Association Awards Nomination Form

Date _____

Category of nomination (Circle one):

Foster / Adopt Parent(s) Social Worker Agency

PERSON SUBMITTING NOMINATION

(Must be a NDFAPA member)

Nominations must be received by September 19, 2008

Name _____

Telephone _____

Address _____
Street

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

PERSON OR AGENCY BEING NOMINATED

Name(s) _____

Telephone _____

Address _____
Street

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Provide the following information on separate sheet of paper (typed or neatly written):

- Service to Children, the Foster Care or Adoption Programs, and to the NDFAPA.
- Narrative and other special information that qualifies the nominee for an award.

Send to: Colette Sorenson, 1535 46th St. W, Williston, ND, 58801. ph 701-572-5320

SAVE THE DATES

"Raising Our Future"

North Dakota Foster &
Adopt Parent Association Conference

October 4 & 5, 2008

Fargo Doublewood Inn

The program for the conference looks outstanding and is sure to provide an excellent training opportunity for all who attend. The conference planners are hoping to push the attendance to over 400 participants this year so be sure YOU are there to enjoy this event! Look for a postcard in your mailbox in June and the brochure in July. Here are some highlights:

Heather Forbes, Orlando, FL – Why Tokens Aren't Working: Helping Children with Difficult Behaviors

Patty Corwin, Fargo – Change with Humor

Steve Wonderlich, Fargo – The Impact of Trauma on Development

David Frisch, Grand Forks AFB – Recognizing Drugs and Drug Behavior

Peter & Vicki Schmidt – Marriage Tips and Dealing with Trauma

Mike Peterson, Minneapolis – Developmental Stages of a Foster Parent

Jan Kjelland, Valley City – Educational Advocacy

Kama Jensen, Fargo – Gay, Lesbian, Bi-sexual & Transgender Youth in Care

North Dakota Children's Justice Symposium

The 2008 North Dakota Children's Justice Symposium will be held at the Ramkota Inn in Bismarck, July 21-24, 2008. The conference (which replaces the Children and Family Services Conference this year) is a collaboration between the North Dakota Supreme Court and the North Dakota Department of Human Services. This multi-disciplinary effort will bring together hundreds of professionals from across the state to address issues that face children and families.

Foster and adoptive parents are key collaborators in our system of care for children and families. You are invited to attend any or all of the conference. There will be a special workshop designed specifically for foster and adoptive parents on Monday, July 21 from 7 to 9 p.m. This workshop, "Supporting and Responding to the Challenges of Visitation in Foster Care" will be presented by Charley Joyce, a frequent and popular contributor to foster and adoptive training across the state. To register for this workshop or for the entire conference, you can go to www.cfstc.und.edu or call the Children and Family Services Training Center at 701 777-3442. We hope to see you at the conference.

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